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# GESTURES, POSITIONS AND PICTORIAL COMMUNICATION IN THE LATE-MEDIEVAL VISUAL LIFE OF SAINT BARBARA<sup>1</sup>

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The Kalanti Altarpiece (c. 1420–34, also known as Barbara-Retabel), attributed to ‚Meister Francke‘, is a pentaptych consisting originally of a corpus and two pairs of wings.<sup>2</sup> The sculpted corpus flanked by four scenes depicts Marianic themes, and on the wings a series of eight separate painted panels visualize the life of Saint Barbara. When the first wings were opened, the narrative was revealed in two rows, as it proceeds horizontally from left to right, starting, on the upper row, with the dispute between Saint Barbara and her father Dioscurus, then moving on to her pursuit and capture. The lower row shows first the interrogation and continues with the two scenes portraying her torture; the story ends with the beheading of the virgin (Fig. 1).

The interpretative potential and richness of details in the paintings is vast, as is testified by previous scholarship.<sup>3</sup> This essay aims to contribute to the understanding of the Saint Barbara paintings by discussing their visual means pertaining to gestures, positions and subsequently, the characterizations of the painted figures: how the depicted characters were worked out by the painter to communicate visually; how the storyline is developed and moved forward with various compositional tools; how conversation, piety or wretchedness are represented in these panels through gesturing and other distinctive details. This discussion also includes the so-called Thomas Altarpiece, also known as *Thomas-Retabel*, in the Hamburger Kunsthalle – another work by Meister Francke, which has received far more scholarly attention than the one in Helsinki.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the art of Meister Francke virtually calls for an analysis of gestures and other such de-

tails, and I am not the first to point them out; in fact, gesturing is to some degree mentioned in almost every study that has been carried out on the works of this master, albeit often just in passing. Interestingly, already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Finnish art historian J.J. Tikkanen used the Saint Barbara paintings as examples when he published his studies on the positions of feet and hands and on expressions of sorrow and pain.<sup>5</sup> More recently, Martina Sitt has analysed the Thomas Altarpiece in particular from this perspective in a more comprehensive way,<sup>6</sup> and so the essay at hand will expand upon this long-term tradition. The Marian imagery of the Kalanti Altarpiece will be left aside although it should be noted that the much less studied sculpted scenes, too, provide fruitful material for questions concerning gestures and other communicative means.<sup>7</sup>

I am dealing first and foremost with the formal qualities of the paintings and therefore with aspects of their ‘style’. Evidently, formal qualities are not only aesthetic or normative elements, but “language of form”, as Lena Liepe has put it, offers significant potential in communicating “readable” meanings.<sup>8</sup>

When it comes, then, to the overall period style of the paintings, they manifest what is generally known as international Gothic or Court style, with Netherlandish influences, but also already hinting at some Renaissance ideals.<sup>9</sup> In accordance with the painting style of, for example, Conrad von Soest or several unidentified masters of the early 1400s, the figures and their bodies are rendered slender and delicate.



Fig. 1. Kalanti Altarpiece, The Legend of Saint Barbara, Wing panels (unframed 2014)

Among medieval art historians, analysing representations of gestures is a rather common practice, often overlapping with a special interest in certain details or featuring as a part of iconographical investigation. Conceptually, gestures constitute separate ‘details’, as if they would be ‘cut off’ from something, though simultaneously they form part of a totality which support our perception and interpretation of them.<sup>10</sup> Details are, moreover, often constructed in a certain mode, charged with distinctive modal assets; “a facial expression can be small in its volume, but in the fictive world of an image, it can mean a focal point of modal interpretation”, to cite Altti Kuusamo.<sup>11</sup> The connection with iconography is obvious, for gestures enable us to distinguish the grieving Virgin from the Virgin of the Annunciation, as will be later discussed. Yet a focus on gestures is, evidently, a sub-field of art history and

connected to interest towards the narrative rhetoric of an image. After J.J. Tikkanen many scholars have shown an intellectual curiosity towards gestures, expressions and body language in general. Their comprehensive research has laid down a most useful matrix for case studies such as this one.<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, the study of gesture, bodily appearances and kinesics also holds significance for anthropologists, linguists, historians and others whose concern, however, is not so much in how gestures appear as representations or artistic forms, but in how they shed light on human behaviour.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, it is widely acknowledged that representation of gesticulation is not the same as reality, but strongly tied to conventions deriving from Antiquity, and, furthermore, gestures are always tied with the whole bearing, or comportment, of the depicted character.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of the fact, then, that

human hands – being particularly forceful and expressive parts of the body – are part of a complex entity, they continue to have a major role in the analyses of bodily postures and gestures, and so they do in this essay as well.

My investigation of gesturing in the Saint Barbara paintings focuses on three aspects, or rather, intertwined lacunae: the potential interpretations of them by beholders from the late-medieval era; the theoretical role of a gesture as detail on the planar surface of a painting; and perceptions offered by the early scholars of the Kalanti Altarpiece regarding these details. The latter reveals a historiographical interest that is developed within the course of this essay. I will begin by discussing hands as indicators of the missing voice or verbal content, then move on to an examination of the multiple meanings that pointing with the index finger incorporates and how this is an influential device in enabling the viewer to participate in the pictorial world of the altarpiece. I will then elaborate on how theatre, actors and stage settings have served as tools for scholars to explain their ideas concerning these paintings. Lastly, I consider the emotional messages the gestures bring forth.

## ‘SPEAKING’ PERSONAGES, CONVERSING HANDS

Like other late-medieval narrative altarpieces, Meister Francke’s paintings of Saint Barbara tell their story by visual means and the painted characters ‘speak’ without articulating actual words. For instance, when Robert Mills states that the image of Saint Barbara in Meister Francke’s paintings is mute in comparison to her brave verbal forthrightness of the written legends,<sup>15</sup> this is only partly true. She is mute in a purely literal, or factual, sense, that is, she is mute inasmuch as she is immobile or, for that matter, invisible in the textual traditions.

Many altarpieces, of course, also align with the textual realm, as they carry inscriptions and various texts, such as text bands akin to modern speech bubbles or sentences painted directly onto the image or on the halos of the saints. Texts are often imaginatively placed and letters appear, for instance, in books, jewels or decorations on the vestments of the figures. Occasionally, words are arranged around the image imitating a frame or carved or painted onto the real wooden frames of the altarpiece. In the Nativity scene of the Thomas Altarpiece (colour plate VI) Meister Francke used banderols: Mary adorns her newborn child and an angel declares the glory of God to the shepherds.<sup>16</sup> J.J. Tikkanen considered these kinds of direct literal means as somewhat easy “surro-



Fig. 2. Kalanti Altarpiece, First panel: The Controversy of the Three Windows

gates” that were developed in order to cope with the “dumbness of art”.<sup>17</sup> He devoted almost his entire career to studying the more sophisticated and refined ways, manifested pictorially, in which persons in visual images could communicate. However, as Jean-Claude Schmitt has suggested, a banderol in itself may also – depending on its form, direction and swirly movement – be understood as a speaking gesture,<sup>18</sup> and not merely act as an easy surrogate, as Tikkanen maintained.

The first panel of the Kalanti Altarpiece introduces the story of Saint Barbara and its protagonists (Fig. 2, colour plate XIII). This is conveyed by the figures of the image and by the text written on Saint Barbara’s halo, *disputacio: sancte*





Fig. 3. Kalanti Altarpiece, Detail of the first panel (see fig. 2): Barbara's hands

*barbare de tribus fenestris* (The Controversy of the Three Windows).<sup>19</sup> This refers to the interaction between Saint Barbara and her father, but in fact, it is Barbara's hands which are doing what the inscription promises. Following the classical mode, they visualise the act of speech.<sup>20</sup> Saint Barbara's right index finger is bent while the palm of her left is open as if holding something. The hands do not mirror each other, but they act together as if *they* would be engaged in a dialogue and thus reflecting Saint Barbara and her father; the interaction is 'performed' or reiterated with the hands. I sug-

gest that Barbara's hands do not only represent speech, but also re-represent her and her father and, consequently, serve to accentuate their dialogue (Fig. 3).

The function of hands becomes very apparent when Saint Barbara's hands are compared to those of Marcian (or Marcianus), the judge in the fifth panel (see Fig. 6), rendered to appear very similar. The interrogation of Saint Barbara is placed directly below the first panel, so seeing these gestures so close to each other underscores their equal meaning: conversation, or should we say, dispute. Marcian's hands give



Fig. 4. Kalanti Altarpiece, Detail of the fourth panel: Imprisonment of St Barbara

the impression of greater weight than do those of Saint Barbara, as if to differentiate the masculine and the feminine, but otherwise the gesture itself is the same. This is, to use the concept of E.H. Gombrich, a pictographic convention that “brings out both the potentialities and the limitations of the medium”, as well as “represents the ‘what’ but not the ‘how’”.<sup>21</sup> In other words, we see that they speak, but the feelings or their intensity is not indicated.

Discoursing with her father, Saint Barbara’s head is tilted upwards, and while speaking she gazes directly and seemingly

without fear at her father. Her chin is square-like, as if to indicate determination; a contrast to other images in which her chin looks soft and smallish. K.K. Meinander – who first attributed the panels to the circle of Meister Francke – failed in 1908 to interpret Saint Barbara’s hands as speaking, but supposed that she, in demonstrating the Holy Trinity, “counts cheekily with her fingers: one, two, three”.<sup>22</sup> The chosen wording not only reveals his misinterpretation regarding the gesture, but betrays his contemporary bias, as if a daughter can’t really guide her father without being cheeky



(Sw. *förnumstigt*). In fact, Meinander ought to have been more aware of gestures pertaining to the act of speaking in medieval art, as his close colleague J.J. Tikkanen had already extensively investigated this.<sup>23</sup> Meinander, however, might have been more influenced by the first documentary accounts drawn of the altarpiece, those by the members of the expedition of the Antiquarian Society in 1874. The leader of the expedition, Eliel Aspelin, wrote: “This [maiden] listens and bows her head in front of his speech, although her hands are directed on the other side.”<sup>24</sup> Aspelin’s misinterpretation included regarding Saint Barbara to be *listening* and not speaking, and understanding her to be bowing her head, which obviously is not the case.

The versatile uses of the hands become apparent if we follow the portrayal of Saint Barbara’s hands along the painted cycle. On the fourth panel, which illustrates her capture, the wall



Fig. 5. Kalanti Altarpiece, Third panel: Pursuit and the Betrayal of the Shepherd

‘cuts’ her hands from the wrists (Fig. 4, colour plate XVI). This is a peculiar compositional decision, and one might argue that it is not overly successful, yet it attains greater meaning if we look at the painting more closely. First, Barbara’s hands are not seen in the picture because she too will be invisible soon – in the dungeon without freedom to speak. Saint Barbara’s wrists remain tied with a rope till the end of the story, and her bound hands also reflect her capture and oppressed position in other scenes. Secondly, the ‘cut’ hands direct her movement towards the inner space of the tower, together with her halo that has already partly slid in. This provides an opportunity for the painter to show how a pictorial space opens up to another one; the heavy brown wooden door is already ajar and thus invites the viewer *to enter*, in other words, to imagine the space from *inside*. This is, undoubtedly, highlighted by the window that offers another chance to peek inside and see the figures, today very obscure, which can be detected through the bars. The ‘cut’ hands, then, work as a point of liminality between the two times and spaces, because Saint Barbara is seen twice, outside and, through the window, inside.<sup>25</sup>

## POINTING, ASSIGNING, AND INVOLVING

Pointing with the forefinger is one of the most common gestures in works of art, for it, among other things, can inform, accentuate and mock.<sup>26</sup> In the paintings under discussion, pointing appears in three panels, and in each case it carries a double function: simultaneously as pointing works ‘inside’ the picture, that is, the characters show each other something, it also works ‘outward’, aiming to catch the eye of the viewer and direct his or her attention. The figures, therefore, have a dual role as well, they are characters in the story as well as actual signs guiding the beholder’s gaze – as modern signs based on the image of the index finger serve to show people how to find the right route. These ‘human signs’ provide guidance to the eye directing the gaze.

On the very first panel Dioscurus points his finger at the three windows of the tower that mark the Holy Trinity (see Fig. 2). Not only is this essential to the narrative, but it is also necessary for the whole purpose of this devotional and liturgical Christian artefact: the beholder was immediately reminded of the most remarkable of the Christian mysteries, the Incarnation, which, of course, enabled the idea of the Trinity. The third panel, in turn, depicts the father and his men searching for Saint Barbara, whose whereabouts they





Fig. 6. Kalanti Altarpiece,  
Detail of the fifth panel:  
Trial of St Barbara

enquire from the shepherds (Fig. 5, colour plate XV). Both the father and traitorous shepherd point their fingers towards Barbara, looking at each other as if to confirm their collaboration. The pointed finger of the wicked shepherd, however, cannot be regarded as Meister Francke's individual or creative solution to portraying this event, since this detail, pointing at the maiden, is mentioned in the written legend of Saint Barbara, for instance, in the *Golden Legend*: "And then her father, which pursued after her, went unto the shepherds and demanded after her. And that one, which would have preserved her, said that he had not seen her, but that other, which was an evil man, showed and pointed her with his finger, whom the holy S. Barbara cursed, and anon his sheep became locusts, and he consumed into a stone."<sup>27</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that the pointing shepherd also appears, albeit in a different manner, on the door panel delineating

the same scene on the Breslau (Wrocław) Barbara Altarpiece from 1447, missing since 1945.<sup>28</sup> The pointing of Dioscurus and the herder, while illustrating the storyline, also intensely direct the viewer's eye to focus onto Saint Barbara's shining head and thus stretch the line of communication outside from the actual picture surface to the beholders.

The scene of the interrogation (the fifth panel) again shows figures pointing with the index finger (Fig. 6, colour plate XVII). Dioscurus points at his daughter in front of the judge Marcianus, to whom he looks, whereas the red-hooded man points at Saint Barbara to his fellow villains; in both instances the index fingers are placed directly on the same line. The father's gesture makes clear to the viewer to whom the judge is speaking. The gesture of the hooded man, in turn, could be categorised rather as *gesticulatio*, which, according to Jean-Claude Schmitt, was "attached to the de-

scription of jugglers' or devil's movements judged uncoordinated or bad", when, in contradiction, the word *gestus* had a positive value.<sup>29</sup> The negative connotation here, however, is defined by the 'juggler's' overall appearance, not clearly by the gesture itself. Nonetheless, his pointing does differ from the visualisations of the other acts of pointing in the panels: first, the man's wrist is bent and thus the impression of informative pointing or directing is changed to that of mocking. And second, the above detail together with his general posture alludes to a possibility that he is pointing at *himself*, not at Saint Barbara. Therefore, he actually attests to the public his own self and his base character; he points to us what kind of a man he is.

The above is applicable to what Tikkanen maintained: a certain motif may, instead of having an *expressive* content, carry a *moral* connotation; it does not, therefore, parade an emotion or an action, but the moral stance of the depicted character.<sup>30</sup> No doubt, then, the jester belongs to the same group of villains who appear in numerous medieval images bullying and tyrannizing Christ or the saints. As Ruth Mellinkoff has clarified, the gestures or habits of these men are often violent, but sometimes also indecent. She has made a brief remark on these specific panels and notes how the unbuttoned tunic of the flagellator in the sixth panel not only "suggests the vi-



Fig. 7. Thomas Altarpiece, Mocking of St Thomas of Canterbury when he leaves England, Hamburg, Kunsthalle

olence of his deed, it also condemns the exposure as indecent".<sup>31</sup>

Many similar coarse male figures appear in Meister Francke's other main work too, the fragmentary altarpiece of Saint Thomas of Canterbury, that is, the earlier mentioned Thomas Altarpiece. On a panel displaying the *Mockery of Saint Thomas of Canterbury* when he leaves England, a man with a moustache and a blue hood points at the saint with his index finger, his arm fully outstretched (Fig. 7, colour plate VIII). He is part of the impious crowd that shouts after Saint Thomas: "Lay hold of the thief! Hang the traitor!"<sup>32</sup> The gesture draws attention to another man's pointing hand right beside him and also to a third man's forefinger, placed at his mouth – these three index fingers together clearly heighten the mocking aspect of pointing here.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, while pointing with his left hand, the moustached man is simultaneously making an unusual obscene gesture with his right: after having cut off the tail of Thomas's fleeing horse, he holds it in front of his lower belly as if it would be his penis. This connotation is strengthened, and in fact supplemented to suggest urinating by his posture as he stands with his pelvis pushed slightly forward and the hair of the horse's tail falls downwards in front of him.<sup>34</sup>

Although the gesture of pointing, as E.H. Gombrich has stated, often "implies a command, a sign of dominance universally understood", it is not always so.<sup>35</sup> Pointing with the index finger could be interpreted in several ways. The gesture was easily associated with bad deeds and immorality, and also denoting wretchedness as we have already seen, but it likewise was applied when respectfully showing something divine. Meister Francke did both in the Thomas Altarpiece: in the scene delineating the *Adoration of the Magi* (colour plate VII), one of the three Kings points at the star, and in the scene displaying *Nativity* (colour plate VI) the two little shepherds (the obvious close relatives of the shepherds in the Saint Barbara panels) point to the angel holding the banderol.

## ACTORS AND 'PICTURESQUE' SHEPHERDS

In his study regarding the usage of index finger in art, J.J. Tikkanen discussed the panel of the shepherds and Saint Barbara's pursuit analysing its 'double action'. This concept covers the above discussed gesture of pointing, but also, on a more general level, the fact that real-life viewers see a young woman hiding, but the characters in the image do not. He compared this to a theatre play where the prompter's voice



is heard throughout the entire hall (not meant, of course, to be heard by all), but on stage it is meant only for one actor.<sup>36</sup> These performance conventions were familiar to medieval viewers of art. In fact, Tikkanen applied the theatre metaphor also in a broader context when he described the change that took place in art from Dante's time on. He claimed poetically: "The artist no longer uses, as when doing handicrafts, ready schema, but puts in the whole energy of his performance. He is a theatre director and an actor at the same time, and leads the twists in the plot by placing himself in every participant's role and his relations to the narrative which now, and with convincing truthfulness, is reflected in their expressions. The characters do not simply recite, they act, and their soul is in their faces, their hands are speaking."<sup>37</sup>

Although the faces in Meister Francke's paintings of Saint Barbara's life reflect limited feelings, the hands are speaking. I would claim, following Tikkanen's remark, that the painter did manoeuvre as if playing both the roles of director and actor. It is especially evident in the scene of the treacherous shepherds that he adopted the role of the actor, as he painted the horsemen from the perspective of the herdsmen, or *vice versa*. In other words, he took the role of the characters he painted. Thus, interpreted with Tikkanen's terms drawn from the world of theatre, details that have been viewed as traditional, 'medieval' ways of picturing space with a reversed perspective may be turned around to represent something novel for the artistic expression of the time.<sup>38</sup>

J.J. Tikkanen is not the only art historian to have used vocabulary associated with theatrical performances in describing these paintings. K.K. Meinander, for instance, wrote in his analysis about pantomime which immediately clarifies the casting to the spectators.<sup>39</sup> Does this reflect the idea, not unpopular at the turn of the century, of seeing all the arts as interconnected? Or, are Tikkanen and Meinander not applying a *metaphor*, but rather a *perception*, in the proper sense of the word, prompted by their lived experiences? Theatre was a very important art form at the time, and, what is more, it was not only watched in theatres, but much played at homes as entertainment for family and relatives. Regarding the turn-of-the-century interpretations of pictures, it is vital to remember that *tableaux vivants*, or living pictures in which the participants don't speak or move, were a popular amusement among people of the upper class.<sup>40</sup> Medieval paintings, in turn, were somewhat foreign even for the educated audience in Finland of the time, and were thus more easily appreciated with the aid of seeing them as akin to an artistic medium closer to their cultural habits.<sup>41</sup>

The scholarly tradition of using verbal expressions pertaining to performances continued: for instance, in 1966 Riitta Pylkkänen, too, compares the use of space in the Saint Barbara paintings to stage scenery. According to her, the actions are placed on a stage, whose scenery of landscape or architecture localises the story solely for this purpose: "By placing the (theatre) scenery diagonally to the surface, the artist has strived towards some kind of tri-dimensional impression."<sup>42</sup> In doing so, she continues, these sets create spatial layers. Furthermore, Riikka Stewen has, in her insightful analysis, discussed the "drama of indexicality" in the Saint Barbara paintings with a special emphasis on visibility, viewing – or impeded seeing.<sup>43</sup>

The fact that only the head of Saint Barbara with braided hair is shown in the two inner images of the upper row emblematises her hidden position; she is indeed concealed by the forest, but through the very large size of the head and halo, *compared* to the size of the forest, she remains a central character in the scene (colour plates XIV, XV).<sup>44</sup> The head is a kind of a fragment in which the whole is not present, though, of course, imaginable, as is in this case. The detail, or fragment, of the head does not suggest that Saint Barbara has crawled under a bush, but we ought to imagine the complete scene, and in fact envisage her running or at least moving forward – this interpretative instruction is offered to the viewer by presenting her in profile and almost-profile, a pictorial code to indicate motion and activity.<sup>45</sup> All aspects considered, when Erwin Panofsky mentions *en passant* (literally in brackets) that "the small scale of the St Barbara may be accounted for by the master's superficial acquaintance with perspective",<sup>46</sup> we must dissent.

The two shepherds have indeed attracted a remarkable amount of scholarly attention (colour plate XV). According to Panofsky, these two are 'genre' figures who are small in the sociological sense, and also "conspicuously poor and picturesque" with "disreputable boots and garments not merely coarse but tattered and frayed at the edges".<sup>47</sup> Clothes, evidently, are also indicators of gender: the early interpreters of the altarpiece, namely the members of the 1874 expedition considered the treacherous shepherd to be a boy, and the reluctant one who lowers her head to be a girl.<sup>48</sup> One reason for this misunderstanding was undoubtedly the manner of their acts on the activity–passivity continuum, but likely their attire mattered, too: the man considered to be a 'boy' wears a hat whereas the 'girl' has a scarf around her head.

The posture and the clothing of the shepherds have, then, for later writers denoted mostly a low social status and ap-

prehensiveness. For instance, even the good shepherd is described as being like “a snail in its shell”.<sup>49</sup> Gesturing and physical comportment, of course, was often used in medieval art to indicate social distinction.<sup>50</sup> This applies to the Saint Barbara paintings, but it is primarily in combination with facial features that the representatives of the poor and the wicked are marked – and rendered as opposite to the elegant Saint Barbara, representing the ideal of a courtly body, as Lena Liepe has defined her appearance.<sup>51</sup> What is more, Meister Francke portrayed one of these characters distinctively as a ‘Jew’, delineated with the typical caricatured Jewish features, crooked nose and thick lips. He appears as the main molester of Saint Barbara during her interrogation and is the one who both cuts and burns her breast (colour plates XVII, XVIII).<sup>52</sup> Hence, these images call for an intersectional look; they touch upon the entangled issues of race, social status and gender.

## PIOUS AND FURIOUS HANDS

As already mentioned, in the five scenes following her imprisonment Saint Barbara’s hands are tied together. The hands cross each other from the wrist area. In the outermost two panels of the lower row illustrating the interrogation and the beheading, her hands denote courteous and pious manners,



Fig. 8. Thomas Altarpiece, Crucifixion (fragment), Hamburg, Kunsthalle

perhaps reminding the modern viewer of gestures characteristic of classical ballet, but contemporary beholders no doubt saw a gesture of humility and piety. This gesture alludes to numerous images of the suffering Christ, and therefore, underscores the *imitatio Christi*.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, it visually hints at images of the Virgin portrayed in the *Annunciation*. In many late-medieval paintings the Virgin receives the Angel Gabriel with her hands crossed on the wrist area, alluding to prayer and humility, but, as opposite to the hands of Saint Barbara, the Virgin’s wrists are crossed with fingers upwards.<sup>54</sup> The Thomas Altarpiece displays the gesture of crossed wrists in both ways, fingers upwards and downwards. In the fragmentary corpus of that altarpiece, once a rendition of the *Crucifixion*, a group of women sit around the Virgin Mary (Fig. 8, colour plate I). Mary’s crossed hands are directed upwards on her chest, as if indeed to turn the beholder’s thoughts to the *Annunciation*. The gesture, then, unites the past and the present: The *Annunciation* signified the beginning of a path leading to what was at present visualized for the viewers of the altarpiece, namely the *Crucifixion*. As it is, instead of highlighting the agony of the Virgin at the moment of her son’s death, Meister Francke emphasised predestination. The portrayal of the second Mary shows her hands crossed downwards, thus beautifully reflecting the hands of the Virgin. Simultaneously, the delicate hands of Mary Magdalene flank the hands of the Virgin from below. All of this evokes a feeling of graceful movement, not only understood as a rendering of the painted characters in motion, but a rhythmical movement on the picture plane, which, in my view, showcases the painter’s artistic skills. Furthermore, I argue that this play with women’s hands uses the same compositional method, or solution, as was discussed before with the three malevolent index fingers outlined in the departure of Saint Thomas: *triplication* is used in both to create intensity, but now it works in a positive domain.<sup>55</sup>

On the lower inner panels of the Saint Barbara cycle representing her torture, Saint Barbara’s hands are roped above the head, bending loosely downward from the wrists (Figs. 9 and 10 [sixth and seventh panel], colour plates XVIII, XIX). The relaxed hands convey to the beholder the same feeling as does the face of Saint Barbara: not pain, but peaceful confidence. Just as there is no grimace on her face, neither are her arms tense, as they would to convey anguish. Though Barbara is permanently holding an unresponsive face, in the mastectomy scene she has turned her eyes slightly upwards, towards the sky. This upward gaze reminds the viewer that Barbara never lost her contact with Christ who,



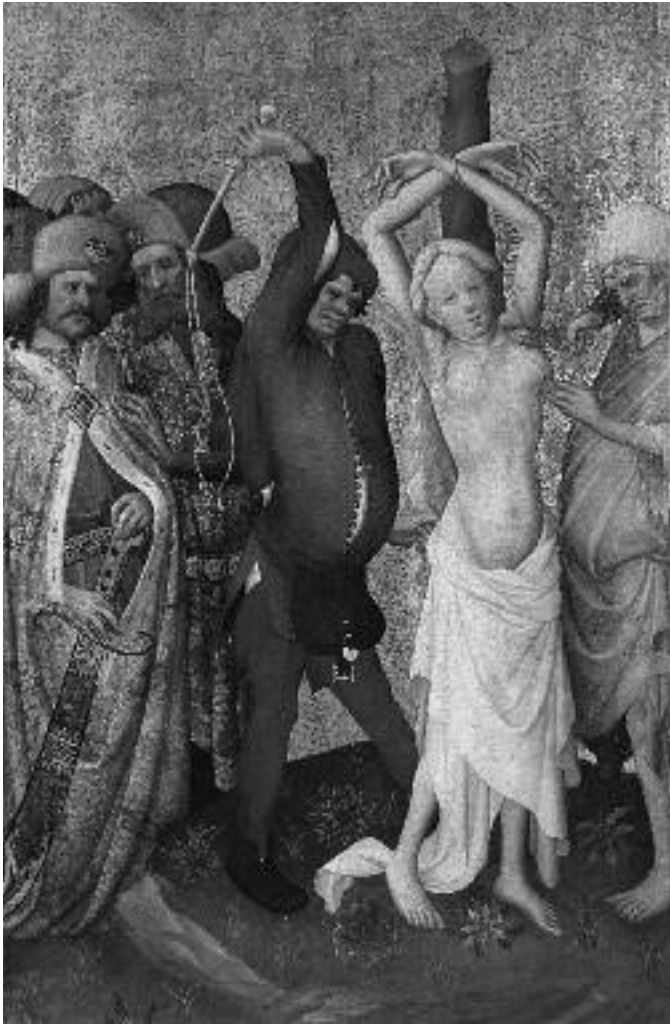


Fig. 9. Kalanti Altarpiece, Sixth panel: The Flagellation of St Barbara

in the night, came to see her and healed her. During the torments she, according to the *vita*, “beheld and looked upward to heaven, saying: Jesus Christ, that knowest the hearts of men, and knowest my thought, I beseech thee to leave me not”.<sup>56</sup> On the next panel, in which Barbara hangs from the gallows, she faces the men in front of her with the stubborn and arguing resistance that is recalled in the written legend. Her hardly distinguishable expressions do not, however, serve to measure their intensity because medieval art tended to reveal powerful feelings through subtle physiognomic nuances.<sup>57</sup>

The anger and rage of Dioscurus are articulated with his clenched fists. In the second scene of the visual narrative testifying to Barbara’s miraculous escape, he shakes his left fist and grips the hilt of the scimitar with the right (Fig. 11). Due to their central setting against the white wall, the sense



Fig. 10. Kalanti Altarpiece, Seventh panel: St Barbara Tormented by Fire

of violence is effectively mediated to the beholders. The young woman’s dangerous predicament is underlined by her placement right above these two ‘weapons’, the fist and scimitar with the sharp tip, both typical representations for masculine violence. It has not gone unnoticed that the position of the scimitar creates a phallic allusion.<sup>58</sup> This is hardly surprising, because weapons and male organs were commonly connected in the Middle Ages and well beyond; most obvious case is the bollock dagger (Gr. *Testikeldolk*), which was fastened to one’s belt in front of the groin.<sup>59</sup>

When Barbara gets caught and is being thrown into the prison (fourth panel, fig. 4), Dioscurus’s fists are in action again: he lifts up his right fist as if he would be on the verge of punching Barbara, or at least threatening to do so. This is today only vaguely discernible because of the damages to the painted surface. With his left fist Dioscurus has grabbed





Fig. 11. Kalanti Altarpiece, Detail of the second panel: Miracle at the Wall



Barbara's long hair. Situated compositionally almost in the very centre of the image and actually penetrating Saint Barbara's halo and therefore being 'superior' to it on the surface plane, the fist receives an additional focus.

## CONCLUSION

The hands of the characters painted by Meister Francke intercede between the existing world (now and then) and that of the planar surface of the painting, directing and guiding the gaze of the beholders. They can also act as compositional features, referring to various pictorial codes and traditions, and in the end deploying the overall substance of the artwork. By suggesting that the hands are akin to diminutive repetitions of the characters themselves, I would like to propose a more concrete interpretation for hands: they are not only reflecting the status, character or action of the person, but are used to actually act or perform the person.

Scholarly approaches tend to circulate in time and, as has become apparent, the 'performative turn' has long roots: However, it was not the domain of textuality and literature, but of theatre that provided a conceptual reference for medieval art at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The potential and ability of the pointing finger painted on the picture plane to reach both the world of the painting itself and that of the actual world of living people underscores how art, and with it also the viewer, is situated on the threshold of these two; the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy – although speaking of canvas instead of the wood panel used in this case – has deliberated on this very topic: "So we have entered there where we will never enter, into this scene painted on a canvas. All at once, there we are. We can't ex-

actly say that we have penetrated there, but neither can we say that we are outside. [...] This is the ordinary command or demand of the painting: very simple, very humble, even derisory. See the invisible, not beyond the visible, nor inside, nor outside, but right at it, on the threshold, like its very oil, its weave, and its pigment."<sup>60</sup>

When I suggest that the jester at the scene of the interrogation is not only pointing at Saint Barbara, but at himself, thus exposing his own character, I claim that Meister Francke made a kind of a meta-image by which he consciously applied all means painting can have and what is more, simultaneously creating a theory of painting. Riikka Stewen, who has analysed the duality of the Saint Barbara paintings, writes: "It is the role of the viewer to constitute the meaning of the work, for its significance is no longer preordained as it was earlier in the Middle Ages. The meaning of the work is no longer absolutely coextensive with its theological meaning; it has an ulterior 'aesthetic' meaning, a meaning constituted by the viewer, who is subjective but no longer subjected to the image."<sup>61</sup>

The medieval 'work' of art, or 'art's work', to borrow the masterly phrasing by Jeffrey Hamburger, is then to develop and in its own particular manner theorize the acts of both looking and picturing. As Hamburger formulates, the 'work' of art is to "mediate between image and text, visible and invisible, presence and absence" and to provide "an implicit theory of the image where medieval texts provide none."<sup>62</sup>

Hence we can step onto the threshold, mingle with the world of the painting, merging with its materiality and responding to its humble demand, as Jean-Luc Nancy put it, but we can also maintain a bit of a distance and enjoy, purely as spectators, how the art works.

## NOTES

- 1 This article evolved from a paper originally presented in 2012 during the IMC conference in Leeds. It has been written within my three-year research project (*The Kalanti Altarpiece. Painting, Materiality and the Itinerary of the Object* funded by the Finnish Academy [2011–2014]). Since then, I have greatly benefitted from the insightful remarks and comments I received from several of my colleagues, notably Leena Valkeapää and Johanna Vakkari.
- 2 For more information about the painter – here identified by his idiomatic name – and his oeuvre as well as detailed description of the altarpiece, see the Introduction chapter. In the 1920s the painted panels were separated from the rest of the art work. For the conservation history of the altarpiece, see Henni Reijonen's article in this volume.
- 3 The more recent contributions include CAVINESS 2001, pp. 115–117; LIEPE 2003A; MILLS 2005, pp. 106–144; RÄSÄNEN 2015.
- 4 On the Englandfahrer/Thomas Altarpiece and the studies concerning it, see the Introduction chapter and the article by Silvia Castro in this volume.
- 5 See TIKKANEN 1912; TIKKANEN 1913A. On Tikkanen and his scholarship, see VAKKARI 2007.
- 6 SITT 2014, esp. pp. 22–29.
- 7 I have examined some of these aspects, such as the hands of the Jewish figures trying to pull down the Virgin's body from the bier, and the juxtaposition of the praying positions of Theophilus and the Virgin Mary on the Nativity; see RÄSÄNEN 2015. On the sculpted parts of the altarpiece, see also NORDMAN 1965, pp. 323–326; MARKUS 2014 and Krista Andreson's article in this volume.
- 8 LIEPE 2003B, p. 140. The word 'reading' is an old concept within art history and, as others of its kind, is not stable but in constant motion, and should not be considered equivalent to seeing the image itself as a text, a paradigm popular in the 1990s which preferred terminology adapted from literary studies. As Elisabeth Sears has reminded us, Meyer Shapiro was a 'reader' of medieval images already in the 1930s; see SEARS 2002, pp. 1–7.
- 9 See e.g. MARTENS 1929, vol. 1, passim; CORLEY 1996, pp. 152–156; STEWEN 1995, p. 88.
- 10 On detail, see ARASSE 1996.
- 11 KUUSAMO 1998, p. 91. This and all further translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
- 12 Studies on gesturing, mostly in medieval art include SCHMITT 1990; SCHMITT 1984A; CHASTEL 2001; BARASCH 1987; GOMBRICH 1982, pp. 63–104; LIEPE 2003B, esp. pp. 88–40. See also GERTSMAN 2012, a collection which deals largely with tears and emotions, but as they are as intertwined with gestures, offers interesting views on these as well.
- 13 See, e.g. BREMMER/ROODENBURG 1991, with a selected bibliography of the subject.
- 14 See e.g. SCHMITT 1990, passim.
- 15 MILLS 2005, p. 126.
- 16 On these details, see e.g. MARTENS 1929, vol. 1, p. 32; SITT 2014, pp. 44f.
- 17 TIKKANEN 1916, p. 116.
- 18 SCHMITT 1990, p. 211.
- 19 The halo of St Barbara has inscriptions in six of the panels, only the second and third images in which her head (and the halo) is depicted as very small they are lacking. For these, see e.g. MARTENS 1929 vol. 1, pp. 44–48.
- 20 On hands resembling speech, see SCHMITT 1990, esp. p. 26.
- 21 GOMBRICH 1982, pp. 88f.
- 22 MEINANDER 1908, p. 174. See also MILLS 2005, p. 113.
- 23 In addition to the references in n. 5, it should be noted that Tikkanen also published his studies in Swedish (which was Meinander's mother tongue, too) and, in fact, collected a large collection of filing cards with his own drawings on various gestures and positions. See VAKKARI 2012.
- 24 I examined in detail the expedition and the documents it produced in a co-authored article; see RÄSÄNEN/VALKEAPÄÄ 2014, p. 16.
- 25 The identification of the other figure has been under discussion; although it would rather logically be Christ (see MEINANDER 1908, p. 162), Martens strongly believed it to represent a female figure whom she proposed to be Juliana; see e.g. MARTENS 1929, vol. 1, p. 46. The scope of this essay does not allow me to handle this interesting detail further; see RÄSÄNEN/VALKEAPÄÄ 2014, pp. 16f.
- 26 On the use of the index, see e.g. ARASSE 1997, pp. 71–79; CHASTEL 2001, pp. 49–89; TIKKANEN 1913A. The chapter on pointing with the forefinger in Tikkanen's monograph was published in Swedish almost as the same but lacking the notations; see TIKKANEN 1913B.
- 27 See William Caxton's *Golden Legend* from 1470, for instance in the internet data base of Fordham University (electronic sources). The legends of Saint Barbara were written already in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in Greek and were later translated into Latin and also into vernacular languages. Her legend, however, was not included in the Jacobus de Voragine's original *Legenda Sanctorum*.
- 28 See LABUDA 1984, p. 35 and p. 39; BORCHERT 2010, p. 477. On this panel the shepherd points upwards where the top of Saint Barbara's head and a slice of her halo can be seen peeking



out behind the rocky landscape – an even more fragment-like rendering than the one in the Kalanti altarpiece.

- 29 SCHMITT 1984B, p. 127; SCHMITT 1991.
- 30 TIKKANEN 1912, p. 3. See also VAKKARI 2012.
- 31 MELLINKOFF 1993, vol. 1, p. 204.
- 32 VORAGINE 1993, vol. 1, p. 60.
- 33 See also SITT 2014, pp. 22–28.
- 34 SITT 2014, p. 25 brings up how the act of cutting a horse's tail (not Thomas' however) appears also in the written legend.
- 35 GOMBRICH 1982, p. 67.
- 36 TIKKANEN 1913A, p. 52: "Erinnert da nicht an das Flüstern im Theater, welches im ganzen Zuschauerraum vernommen wird, auf der Szene aber nur von dem Angeredeten?". Cited also in SITT 2014, p. 24. The same thesis was presented also in TIKKANEN 1916, p. 150.
- 37 TIKKANEN 1905, p. 474.
- 38 STEWEN 1995, p. 88 mentions the reversed perspective in the third panel as pertaining to medieval mode of painting.
- 39 MEINANDER 1908, p. 174.
- 40 See e.g. VALKEAPÄÄ 2015, p. 78.
- 41 I examine this aspect and the 19<sup>th</sup> century reception of the altarpiece more closely in an article co-authored with Leena Valkeapää; see RÄSÄNEN/VALKEAPÄÄ 2014.
- 42 PYLKKÄNEN 1966 (no page numbers). The text in Pylkkänen's booklet is also in Swedish, English and German, but the latter two are shortened versions and are missing this sentence.
- 43 STEWEN 1995, p. 89.
- 44 For further argumentation on this, see RÄSÄNEN 2006 p. 64, and LAHTI/RÄSÄNEN 2008, p. 255.

- 45 See ÅKESTAM 2010, pp. 81f. with bibliography.
- 46 PANOFSKY 1953, p. 71.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 See more on this in RÄSÄNEN/VALKEAPÄÄ 2014, p. 16.
- 49 WORTMANN 1959, p. 16.
- 50 On gesturing and social distinction see e.g. THOMAS 1991, p. 8; LIEPE 2003B, p. 103.
- 51 LIEPE 2003A, pp. 97f.
- 52 For an extensive analysis on the renditions of Jews and themes related to anti-Jewish discourses conveyed by the Kalanti Altarpiece, see RÄSÄNEN 2015.
- 53 See SCHMITT 1990, p. 260.
- 54 This is, naturally, only one of the many ways the Virgin can hold her hands when facing the Angel; on variations see ÅKESTAM 2010, esp. pp. 75–82.
- 55 The general difference or opposing nature of these two types of hands has been brought up already by LICHTWARK 1899; see SITT 2014, p. 85 (n. 245). SITT (2014, pp. 85–88) discusses the slenderness of hands in the Crucifixion scene as showing piety and caring, and searches the stylistic links to other works of the period.
- 56 See n. 27.
- 57 LIEPE 2003B, p. 116.
- 58 LIEPE 2003A, p. 99 has made this remark in connection with her critical discussion on the supposed pornographic nature of these paintings.
- 59 IMMONEN 2014, esp. pp. 7–10.
- 60 NANCY 1996, p. 57 and p. 59.
- 61 STEWEN 1995, p. 89.
- 62 HAMBURGER 2006, p. 406.